

The Situation of Film Theory in 1968

This is an example of intellectual history in which we study not only ideas, but also the individuals and institutions that bring them into being and change along with them.

trends--a large number of people are interested in the same area, but are not in perfect agreement with each other (eg. psychoanalysis); this allows for productive difference (hopefully); antagonistic difference (possibly).
[imp. aside: remember too that people are also involved with this in terms of careers, competitiveness, etc.]

Individuals: it takes people for the production of ideas, articles, films, and for the interaction of this. Personal histories often intervene as well (not that that explains everything, and not that I want to just gossip about my colleagues in the field, but it needs to be understood by anyone who is going to enter the field, that it's not an area of pure disinterested scholarship (if there is such a thing).

Institutions: ideas and individuals can't exist without institutions, even informal ones. Things like film clubs, magazines, conferences, and graduate programs, are the base on which other things develop, come into being and change. Example of the Feminist and Film Reader.

There is also a personal history for individuals; theorists themselves change and develop their theoretical perspective and tools and work over time. Thus, the importance of Godard for many varying individuals can be interpreted as a "trend"--almost all the significant film theorists who form a generation of the late 60s and early 70s write about Godard. (film practice leads film theory, in general.)

1968: metaphor of the cross section

cross section of the upper arm of human does not indicate that the arm ends in a hand; this is the limit of such a tool for understanding, history and historical analysis lets us conclude something,

In film criticism: **dominance of "taste"**

Sight and Sound, weekly and monthly reviewers (before Shalit, Siskel & Ebert, *Entertainment Tonight*, etc.)

- a. validation of "quality" European film
- b. some validation of "serious" (e.g. morally serious content) H'wood. Thus despite their antagonistic differences, Kael and Sarris are united in validating much of Hollywood, "movies" over "film"
- c. the historical tradition (but, for ex., Eisenstein, not Vertov).

In film theory, dominance of a realist aesthetic
Bazin--vs. Eisenstein, vs. expressionism
Kracauer (prob. best known film th. book in Eng. at time)--
same, with a different inflection
both, for realist tradition, for Italian neo-realism.

What was available? what was in distribution? (US)
art house circuit: Bergman, some of the New Wave, some
verite doc'y, the Italians (La Dolce Vita, 8 1/2, Blow Up),
some Japanese, Brit. slick realists
commercial: some changes in breakdown of studio system:
e.g. Bonnie and Clyde, Easy Rider, a more marked
authorship
film societies: the European tradition and major H'wood ;
AudioBrandon as the norm, New Yorker and Grove as
new, upstart.
U.S. avant garde: just getting started as a national
phenomenon.
college courses: virtually none; "appreciation" of "classics"
at best.

The full flowering of authorship

Sarris: *American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-68*
Authorship makes a case for taking H'wood seriously.
Decisively challenges notion of "taste."
"Not a theory" (Sarris).
Allows for the analysis of general patterns;
still has investment in a notion of "quality";
validates formal and stylistic analysis (but hides its own ideological prejudices at
the same time; eg. validates Hawks and Hitchcock, but studiously avoids
noticing any misogyny in them).

The rapid development of authorship (and genre, which allows for a more social
reading of H'wood) has an institutional basis as well:

- the existence of movies on tv.
- the existence of re-run houses in certain urban areas
- the low cost section of 16mm dist. catalogues

An intellectual basis as well: the acceptance by a generation of young college
educated people of movies as a valid art form; a subversion of the norms of the
university itself. Movie going as an important cultural activity, as well as
entertainment and escape. Eg, the Orson Welles in Cambridge MA and the exam
period Bogart retro. (This was the first arrival of the tv generation on the campus;
people who accepted moving sound / image material as an equal, if not yet
dominant medium in relation to print.)

[aside on my own experience 64-66, 2-3 H'wood movies a day in the Navy; what
you learn from extended and repeated immersion in H'wood product.]

general idea: film theory is decisively influenced by a shifting canon. (1) evaluation changes (2) new films become available (or old ones become re-available).

Also in 1968.

- Tet Offensive; turning point in public opinion about the VN war; shows VC can strike anywhere at will; not decimated.
- Johnson withdraws from election; cannot speak publically without drawing a protest demo; in last 18 months of term only visits military installations.
- third long hot summer of ghetto uprisings
- Expanded student movement; Columbia takeover (major SDS action)/NYC as news and print journalism center, effect in coverage
- assassination of Martin Luther King as he is more involved in labor issues and after explicit anti-imperialist speaking; urban rebellions after his death.
- assassination of Robert Kennedy, leading liberal contender for Democrats
- growth and failure of the Gene McCarthy movement (left-liberal wing of Democratic Party.)
- Chicago Democratic Convention, nominates Humphrey while police riot attack demonstrators on tv.
- Election of Richard Nixon. (represents Republican middle and corporate liberal wing.)
- Paris, May-June. Student-worker strike threatens DeGaulle govt; military on alert; CP breaks militancy, Maoists emerge.

It was hard to see how authorship addressed these matters.

The new Godard films:

2 or 3 Things I Know About Her (67), NY Film Festival, Oct 68.

La Chinoise (67), US 68

Weekend (67) NY Film Festival, Sept. 68

Le Gai Savoir (68),

after May-June begins intense period of militant films, collaboration with Jean-Pierre Gorin (Dziga Vertov Group)

Rise of the US Underground: Warhol, *Chelsea Girls*

The question then emerges: what would a radical political cinema be?

In theatre: the explosion of Off-Off Broadway; first move into SoHo.

In NYC sub bohemia: move into Lower East Side.

Expansion of poetry and writing, dance (Judson Dance Workshop; Rainer, Schneeman, performance art)

Overnight growth of underground newspapers

expansion of counter-culture

recreational drugs: marijuana, psychedelics

Rock music, etc.

The creation of Newsreel, the New Left documentary film organization(s)
John Hess, "Notes on U.S. Radical Film, 1967-80" (Jump Cut)
revival of interest in 30s militant doc'y--Russell Campbell, Wm.
Alexander)

To summarize: there was a rapid development of a broadly constituted radical film culture; media people, just as others were influenced by this. Many barriers seemed to be falling. Art and politics; lifestyle and beliefs; activism and media.

In this context, Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969/72):

Eisenstein's aesthetics: E as political radical and aesthetic innovator, bridging modernism and popular culture.

Authorship (Ford/Hawks)

"Ford's work is much richer than that of Hawks and that this is revealed by a structural analysis; it is the richness of the shifting relations between antinomies in Ford's work that makes him a great artist, beyond being simply an undoubted auteur."

(aesthetic complexity highest value; basic modernist aesthetic position)

[irony: attacked in Screen as auteurist]

Semiotics. Basic introduction. model/metaphor of language. for a more scientific analysis of aesthetic.

But also, an argument for a different history of cinema (every theory, sooner or later has to come up with a theory / model of origins)

"Cinema did not only develop technically out of the magic lantern, the Daguerreotype, the phenakistoscope and similar devices--its history of Realism--but also out of strip-cartoons, Wild West shows, automatia, pulp novels, barn-storming melodramas, magic--its history of the narrative and the marvellous. Lumiere and Melies are not like Cain and Abel; there is no need for one to eliminate the other. It is quite misleading to validate one dimension of the cinema unilaterally at the expense of all the others. There is no pure cinema, grounded on a single essence, hermetically sealed from contamination.

This explains the value of a director like Jean-Luc Godard, who is unafraid to mix Hollywood with Kant and Hegel, Eisensteinian montage with Rossellinian Realism, words with images, professional actors with historical people, Lumiere with Melies, the documentary with the iconographic. More than anybody else Godard has realized the fantastic possibilities of the cinema as a medium of communication and expression."

conclusion of S&M: reform teaching, vs. overwhelming power of lit. in humanities curriculum. Appendix, 1, style; 2, pantheon.

[1972 version: drops that, defense of avant garde; two avant gardes: formal experimental, socialist / radical] Then becomes a filmmaker with Laura Mulvey.

Godard and others--the impact of film practice on film theory

Godard as Brechtian; as postmodernist

Many use the model of scientific investigation

--that theory proceeds practice

medicine, engineering, etc.

(this of course is flattering to theorists)

However, in the human sciences it is different

practice, in this case the art of film as developed by filmmakers,

almost always precedes film theory

Film theory is a relentless attempt to catch up to film practice

exception--the extreme distortion produced in academic film studies in the 70s-80s by a specific group who want to monopolize the discussion for reasons of professional self promotion (example of CPAs and taxes) who attempt to redefine film theory as a certain kind of discourse

Just as Italian neo-realism was the "right" movement for Bazinian theory [the current canon], the film movements of the 60s were the basis for the film theories of the post 68 period.

although not uniformly--the changing fortunes of Bergman

the important examples of Antonioni, Rossellini

Godard becomes the most crystalized version of 60s concerns in film

his extreme self consciousness of film

of himself and his own ideas and personality (public persona as self promo)

Godard as Swiss intellectual

the romanticism of Rousseau

the rationalism of Voltaire

The key films

Breathless

Vivre Sa Vie

Pierrot Le Fou

Alphaville

Masculin-Feminine

Weekend as Godard's critique of modern civilization

1966

the idea of mixing drastically different styles, forms

assaulting conventional expectations (esp. bourgeois good taste)

"absurdist"

political, in a certain way

moralistic (always in Godard)

The concept of classical Hollywood cinema

The idea of a Brechtian cinema, influence of BB

[see Wollen essay on **Wind from the East** as counter-cinema]

[NB. The JC definition of counter-cinema is much broader than the dominant notion in film theory]

The problem of a political reading of Brecht vs. a strictly formalist reading

example of Brian Henderson essay (in M&M 1, H's Critique)
"Toward a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style"
claims that the camera movements in themselves are ideological
(or in this case anti-bourgeois ideology)
Robin Wood's reply: but I end up enjoying it, appreciating it as its
own aesthetic choice/device
test this for yourself when we see the film
[note too, that this argument is essentially the same as (ie working
in the same set of presuppositions as) Bazin's argument that style creates
meaning, and Henderson's argument is not all that much different than Bazin's in
explicating the sequence shot in Renoir's **Le crime de M. Lange**.

An apparent puzzle. The resolution: The concept of "Brechtian" must be
understood as fundamentally political, and not therefore reducible to form alone.
The notion of a strictly formal attack on bourgeois ideology is the dream of petty
bourgeois intellectuals who would like a painless revolution that only takes place
in people's heads, that could be accomplished in form alone. In actual point of
fact, Brechtian has to be understood with the following minimal concerns:

- a. a radical content
- b. an innovative form that resists "easy" or "comfortable" assimilation
[B's attack on "culinary" or "Aristotelean" theatre]
- c. an historical moment, a political context
- d. and an audience, ready, willing, and able to take action
BB--good theatre divides its audience

Godard as postmodernist

postmodernism

being after modernism

1. vs. eclecticism, for the clean, machine age,
Bauhaus, form follows function

2. novelty and originality, always avant garde
3. reject decoration, ornament; for geometric,
clear

4. vs. national, regional, vernacular, for the
international and cosmopolitan

5. art of the future--would affect society (but
fundamentally elitist--intellectuals will decide)

example: Le Courbusier housing blocks

postmod characteristics:

1. plurality of styles, hybrid, eclecticism

2. recycling of styles, "retro style"; quotations,
collage, parody, pastiche

3. ornament and decoration

4. mix high and low culture, assumes various
responses from general public and those "in the know"

[a kind of irony] but makes work accessible to both

5. concern with meaning, statement (art can communicate,
this should be a concern of the artist)

6. "intertextuality" constant reference to the world of art, of
media itself, as an artificial but real part of existence. Art and discourse structure
the way we understand the world of "the Real". Out there is in here.